The Fifties and the Feminine Mystery

Female Representation in Post-War Melodrama

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Chapter 1: Introduction

For better or worse, the American 1950s have long been regarded as perhaps the most conformist decade of the 20th century. In this period, America yearned for security, both in social and political ideologies. Strict moral conventions concerning sexuality were intensified, and women's sexuality became increasingly associated with domestic virtues. Women were expected to remain "feminine" – a term that implies "submissiveness and allure along with sexual chastity – and to embrace domesticity after the war" (E. May 71).

> Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night – she was afraid to ask even herself the silent question – "Is this all?" (Friedan, 15)

This excerpt from Betty Friedan's milestone work, *The Feminine Mystique,* first published in 1963, defined "the problem that has no name", telling middle-class women their role was to seek fulfillment as wives and mothers. Marriage and motherhood were values associated with femininity, or proper womanly behavior in post-war America, proclaiming that women who wanted a more professional life were neurotic and unfeminine. In my thesis, I will examine a discrete number of films set in the American 1950s, which depict women's struggles under the disguise of "traditional values" from the Victorian age that fully reemerged in the post-war era. In fact, what this selection of films offers is forcefully unconventional depictions of women struggling with the conventions of gender, class, race, and sexuality, and thus, suggest the power of post-war taboos.

Female schizophrenia and the containment of female public participation in post-war America are central issues that need to be linked to the larger imperatives of post-war policies and the development of the mass culture of that time. The leading ideology was filled with mixed messages about what women should and should not do, and what they could and could not be. While one image insisted on women's equality, the other insisted on total subordination. Historians will rightly argue that women have suffered under contradictory images throughout history, and especially since the 19th century. The purpose of this thesis is to point out that the situation increased with a particular intensity in the domestic sphere after

WW II. This is clearly evident in the context of femininity, sexuality, and consumerism, dramatized by the female characters in the four films I will analyze.

Theory and Methodology

Most significant for the discipline of American studies is to "borrow" elements from other disciplines, that is aspects from sociology, history, cultural studies, film- and media studies. The basis for my thesis is no exception, as I seek to ground my work in statistics and readings from all the above-mentioned disciplines in order to show how post-war women are reflected on screen. The title of this thesis, *Film and the Feminine Mystery: Female Representation in Post-War Melodrama,* alludes to the fact that film and gender relations should be considered "a marriage made in American studies heaven", as I will touch on all the above-mentioned disciplines to explain my thesis.

In the following, I will occasionally refer to how Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* is an interesting historical artefact that describes the eternal feminine myth as a patriarchal construction where women learn to be the object rather than the subject. Furthermore, she explores how this is partly rooted in popular culture and the power of female representation on screen. In this respect, Friedan charts the division in American post-war culture between the housewife and the career woman as dependent versus independent, a theme which I find relevant in all the films in question. Friedan's milestone contribution about how the post-war American female myth emerged and hardened into a mystique, "unquestioned and permitting no questions, shaping the very reality it disordered" (Friedan 44) fueled feminist film criticism in the 1960s and 1970s, and revitalized the melodrama genre as a political instrument.

In the process of mapping out this thesis' social-historical background, I have mostly relied on the work of Elaine Tyler May, a professor of American Studies and History at the University of Minnesota, and particularly her book *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*. This book explores the interconnection between Cold War policies and the domestic ideology that Betty Friedan revealed in her *Feminine Mystique.* Drawing on sociology, history, and popular culture, I find that May's work underscores my thesis, namely that Cold War ideology and Americans' emphasis on domesticity were "two sides of the same coin" (10). Her work uses a historical approach and suggests that both the Depression and WW II were significant in understanding the post-war family life and gender

roles. Perhaps not surprisingly, some critics have pointed out how the book deals almost exclusively with the white, middle-class segment of the population, leaving out a fair amount of other minority groups. Still, I find her work interesting as it supports the hidden neuroses of post-war America, and supports my argument that women have suffered under contradictory images since the 19th century, and that the situation increased with a particular intensity in the domestic sphere after WW II.

Early feminist film criticism will not be dealt with in depth in this thesis, as it does not constitute a substantial part of my discussion. Yet, I will give a short introduction to the elements that I find useful for my analysis. In the vast amount of feminist material since the mid 1970s, one cannot ignore Laura Mulvey's milestone contribution to the field of film studies: *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. The key elements of her theories are psychoanalysis and feminist views on spectatorship, indicating how the male viewing subject is active in relation to the passive female. This contribution has influenced contemporary feminist film theorists, as Mulvey introduced the term "male gaze", arguing that film as a medium is an instrument of the male gaze, producing representations of women as a passive sexual fantasy from a male point of view. Equally important is Mary Ann Doane's contribution to the field of feminist film studies and culture. This thesis will examine how she deals with women and consumerism in "The Economy of Desire: The Commodity Form in/of the Cinema", and how she comments on women's films and the melodrama genre, as well as the relationship between looking and buying in *Desire to Desire* (1987). Femininity is not always connected to the female body, but is also related to the relationship of power and how femininity has been attributed to personality traits of passivity.

Molly Haskell's historical contribution *From Reverence to Rape* (1987) gives an interesting historical approach to how women have been represented on the Hollywood screen throughout American film history. Her book is more or less grounded in the assumption of how Hollywood mirrors society, which is clearly stated in her introduction: "Movies are one of the clearest and most accessible of looking glasses into the past, being both cultural artefacts and mirrors" (xviii). Her contribution to how "initial feminist understanding of how representation is intricately linked to patriarchal myths, values and opinions" (McCabe 10), underlines my thesis of using films set in and from the post-war era as historical sources to explore women's social position in the Fifties, based on the relationship between film, ideology and politics.

Female Representation

For the purpose of this thesis it is necessary to define certain key terms that I will frequently use in my analysis. Female representation – how women come across on screen – is closely related to sexuality, and more so, women are often represented as part of a larger context, closely associated with the nuclear family or social circle. The theories of how women have been represented in Hollywood and how the codes of sexual behavior from the 1950s are to be understood are both vast and diverse. Sexuality is defined in various ways, but this thesis will mostly rely on how sexual values and sexual behavior in the fifties are to be understood from a historical perspective, rooted in the Victorian Age. In so doing, sexuality needs to be established in moral and social terms, and how the term alludes to a certain set of conventions that gives us identity and value in the eyes of others. According to Jeffrey Weeks' work on sexuality: "the patterns of female sexuality are inescapably a product of rooted power of men to define and categorize what is necessary and desirable" (36). By and large, female representation is closely related to the structures of power, and needs to be defined in relation to sexuality, gender, class, and race.

A key issue when discussing female representation then is to establish gender as an essential element of identity, with classical connotations of what are typically feminine and masculine characteristics. Typical feminine characteristics take on caring, sensitive, passive, soft, fragile, and private connotations, versus the masculine tough, hard, active, and public characteristics. Class as a category, on the other hand, consists of both men and women and the differences between classes may not have the same significance for women as for men: "the sexual patterns that exist in the twenty-first century are a product of a social struggle in which class was a vital element" (Weeks 35). How different people of different classes behave is related to which social class they belong to. Thus, gender is a crucial divide. For the purpose of this thesis, the respectable standards of family and domestic life with strict division of male and female roles and the heterosexual norm are related to middle-class assumptions of sexuality, which can be quite different than for people of lower classes and different races. Race is based on a belief of the superiority of the white European Western population, and other ethnic groups are represented as the Racial Other. [1] The issue of race will not be dealt with in depth in this paper, but the boundaries of race, gender, and class inevitably overlap

[1] The racial "other" meaning an ideological construction of otherness based on racial differences in the discourse of colonialism, discussed in Edvard Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and Homi Bhaba's *The Location of Culture* (1994).

when discussing female representation in the films in question. Ethnic minorities are proportionally represented in higher numbers in the working class or poor, while the definition of membership within the ethnic group can depend on performing gender and sexual attributes (Weeks 39). As Weeks writes, "The 'invention of sexuality' was not a single event, now lost in a distant past. It is a continuing process in which we are simultaneously acted upon, and actors, objects of change, and its subject" (40). This statement becomes important when I discuss female representation in the films in discussion. How women come across on screen is also related to their class and race. In addition, from a feminist point of view, representation is intricately linked to patriarchy and structures of power, and its dominance is revealed by the inadequacies of women's roles and images on screen.

Popular Culture

Another key term that is important to explore in this context is culture and the way in which Hollywood films may or may not be used as a cultural mirror. Do the films in question truly reflect American culture of the 1950s, and thus reflect women's social position? If so, films function as cultural artefacts, and culture as a term must be defined. Furthermore, I will explain the relationship between American popular culture and American myth making and briefly mention how this is reflected on screen.

Culture is a fluid term that is a bit difficult to grasp, but according to Campell's and Keen's introduction to *American Culture*, the term can be defined at its broadest as "a way of life" (5). Popular culture can therefore be understood as the culture of the masses, as opposed to "high culture", which is in contrast the "way of life" of the power elite of society. According to this definition, a whole range of cultural products and artefacts become available for analyzing the American "way of life", including film. In order to trace American women's social position in the 1950s, it is useful to study films from that era or set in that era, thus film function as an interesting historical artefact. The assumption is that popular culture reflects "through the mediation of myth and symbol, significant fields within popular consciousness" (Walsh 3) and gives a body of insight into social history, in this case the social history of women. American national myths are vast and diverse, yet most tend to embrace essentially WASP values and identities, ignoring the indigenous or black cultural heritage. Film representing popular culture expresses some kind of mythical dream, but yet can also question leading ideologies of power, class, gender, and race. Thus it can also act as a site of cultural contestation.

In this thesis I will investigate how the melodrama films set in the 1950s reflect the power relations and the cultural conflicts of the larger society, as films that come out of Hollywood studios are often put in the category of popular culture. In this case, according to Andrea Walsh in *Women's Film and Female Experience*, popular film "explores both the surface and underside of human experience and is particularly suited to discovering historical undercurrents since repressed or dissident fantasies can be expressed more easily through the mediation of myth and symbol" (4). Furthermore, she states that "a culture is popular if it involves two-way communication" (6). In other words, popular culture is not created "for the people", but is also created "of the people", reflecting the realities of their everyday life.

Ida Maria Jahr also discusses popular culture in her master's thesis *Better Not Sleep Under Water,* where she raises the question of "whether the popular culture of a society in any tangible way can be used to read the values, beliefs and practices of that society" (20) and thus raises the question of how Hollywood film can be seen as a signifier for American culture. Popular culture reveals different dimensions of social reality than other traditionally historical methods, and thus describes the American way of life through its activities of representation. But still, it is important to leave the criteria of realism behind when discussing films. By studying a world of fiction, one can interpret the myths and symbols and discover important historical and contemporary undercurrents that reflect society. Hollywood has generated a lot of classical American myths, and has served as America's favorite history teller and myth machine (Jahr 33). In this case, Hollywood culture seems to represent how the different film companies prefer to view America, meaning that the films reflect the American way of life, or at least uphold the dominant views of society.

Establishing film as a cultural artefact that provides the concept of myth and symbol combined with the influence of Friedan's *Feminine Mystique,* might account for the critical readings of 1950s melodramas that started in the 1970s. The films from that era are viewed differently now than they were by the contemporary viewers of that time. Due to our historical perspective, we view the films differently than their contemporary audiences. For this reason old films give contemporary viewers important insight into the past, reflecting differing sets of social codes. Still, for the purpose of this thesis, these films cannot be fully appreciated and understood without a historical context. Old films give us insight into the changing aesthetics of film reception as well as the political landscape in which the film was received. How contemporary viewers view the films depends much on the viewers' sensitivity to the social problems and class politics that the original films addressed. By comparing modern melodrama with older ones this thesis comments on a unique historical time period in

modern history with many important socio-political changes. Still, the new films come across as surprisingly ahistorical, commenting on how society has radically changed in many ways, much still remains the same, especially in the realm of female representation.

The Films in Question

In the following, I will examine female representation in post-war melodramas, in relation to four different films: *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), *Imitation of Life* (1959), *Far From Heaven* (2002), and *The Hours* (2002). This selection of films is interesting as they all point to how white, middle-class women and their bourgeois domesticity fostered false moralistic values and preserved confusing social patterns. Furthermore, the films explicitly pin-point the strong and sometimes sick ideals both men and women were faced with in post-war America, across gender, race, class, and sexual boundaries. The four films found the basis of my thesis, and serve as historical sources that highlight issues of women's social position in the 1950s. The different female characters represent how post-war women negotiated the leading ideology of domesticity, motherhood and sexuality, which echoed the 19th century ideas of proper female behavior.

All That Heaven Allows (1955), directed by the German immigrant Douglas Sirk, became an instant box-office success upon release. The film tells the story of a wealthy suburban widow, played by Jane Wyman, who develops a scandalous relationship with her much younger gardener, played by Rock Hudson. Their relationship becomes the focus for town gossip, and the female protagonist suffers from extreme pressure to give up love in order to sustain her social position within her community and keeping her close family together. The film deals with issues of class and maternal sacrifice, and thus reveals the intensity of motherhood in the post-war domestic sphere.

Imitation of Life (1959), also directed by Douglas Sirk, deals with two single mothers, one black and one white, played by Lana Turner and Juanita Moore. The white female protagonist is a struggling actress who has high ambitions and eventually becomes rich and famous, while the black woman becomes her devoted servant. The film depicts the story of the two women and their daughters' struggle in relation to prejudice and social control, and deals with issues of class, race, and women working outside the home.

Far From Heaven (2002) is a modern contribution to the Sirkian melodramas so common of the 1950s. Directed by Todd Haynes, the film is set in 1957 in Hartford, Connecticut, and deals with themes that would have been impossible fifty years ago due to

strong censorship. The film tells the story of an affluent suburban housewife, played by Julianne Moore, whose husband Frank is a homosexual. Dealing with her husband's sexual frustrations she finds comfort in her black, male gardener, thus the film pairs off interracial romance with the theme of homosexuality. Furthermore, the film depicts Cathy's struggle in face of town gossip and the limited choices she has when her marriage falls apart.

The Hours (2002) is based on a complex novel by Michael Cunningham (1998), and tells the story of three women of different generations whose lives are interconnected by Virginia Wolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. Although this women-driven film depicts female struggle for existence, issues of sexual frustrations and suicide, the purpose of including this film in this thesis is mainly because of Julianne Moore's interesting character. Again, she plays a troubled 1950s housewife, suffocating within the confines of domestic suburbia. What is so interesting about this character is how she perfectly fits into the context of Friedan's description of bewildered post-war housewives. Furthermore, this character looks back to the fifties and thus displays the shifting duality in female representation then and now.

For the purpose of this thesis I want to investigate how the legacy of 1950s social realism is traceable in the contemporary contributions to the melodrama genre. By comparing and contrasting old versus new film productions I seek to analyze the persistency of the white, middle-class heritage. The modern contributions to the genre travel back in time to put focus on prevailing issues on gender, sexuality, race, and class.

Thesis Outline

The second chapter of this thesis is devoted to exploring where the ideology of 1950s female roles came from and the underlying factors that created such a claustrophobic atmosphere for women. In this chapter, women's sexual and social positions are explored in a historical context to show how women have been related to the institution of family from the Victorian age to the 1950s. Equally important is to investigate how the Depression and WW II helped shape women's roles in the relationship between women and work, women and family, and women and consumerism. Furthermore, I have made a strong connection between the Cold War nuclear threat, the larger imperatives of post-war policies and 1950s perceptions of femininity to suggest how conflicting forces imply "the problem that has no name".

Chapter 3 is the key chapter of this thesis where I propose to examine the films in relation to the different historical and socio-cultural aspects discussed in Chapters 1 and 2. For

each film, I have chosen to close read a few key scenes that stand out and allude to the purpose of this thesis. The films will be compared and contrasted and I will discuss how the films from the 1950s can be used as historical documents that comment on 1950s assumptions on class, race, and gender issues. Equally important is how the modern contributions to the melodrama genre look to the past to comment on the present assumptions regarding feminine ideology.

In the final chapter I will bring together the various considerations from the previous chapters, and, hopefully, the result will be a better understanding of how film can be used as an interesting historical source to comment on the post-war taboos and the concept of the female ideology of the 1950s.

Chapter 2: Historical Context

Women's roles have undergone a series of redefinitions throughout history. The American 1950s was a time with a particular emphasis on traditional values of home and family, creating a female myth around the seemingly content American housewife. In order to explore how the myth emerged and the power of post-war taboos over female public and private participation on screen, it is necessary to explore women's history on a broader historical scale. In so doing, this chapter seeks to briefly trace the historical changes of women's roles from the mid-19th century through WW II and touch on a few central issues in the context of post-war foreign policy that helped shape these roles. In addition, this context is necessary in order to demonstrate how closely connected femininity and female sexuality is and always has been with the nuclear family. Since the Industrial Revolution and the rise of "the Victorian Woman", women were narrowly associated to the domestic sphere and motherhood. The typical "women's films" from the 1950s reflected the assumption that "femininity was an identity constituted and interpreted by discourses of class, race, and nation, yet the housewife was predominately a white, middle-class construction" (Lloyd & Johnson 8). My focus in this thesis is mainly on women from the white middle-classes, as this group "offered the image of a homogeneous population pursuing the same goals – 'living well' and accumulating goods" (Doane 123). This aspect is particularly intensified in the condensed consumer-oriented atmosphere of the post-war years, which is represented all the films I will discuss. Despite the sharp division by race in the post-war American society, there is unfortunately little room for in-depth summary of race relations in this thesis. The race aspect will, however, be briefly mentioned, as it serves as a significant theme in *Imitation of Life* and *Far From Heaven*.

The Victorian Woman

Concepts of femininity and sexuality have undergone significant change throughout history, but sexuality as we know it today derives from the Victorian Age when "sexuality was carefully confined and moved into the home" (Foucault 3). The long rise of the middle-class was reaching a climax throughout the Western world in the 19th century. To demonstrate the middle-class' moral authority and superiority over social groups below and above, strict Christian family virtues and life in the private sphere were values it embraced. The mother in the family served as a strong role model, full of moral power, "especially if her attention was

focused on her husband, children, and servants in the home, and charitable work outside (which might include a global consciousness of heathens and foreign missions)" (Yeo 6). The mother who fit the image as "the Angel in the House" shaped her children's fate and cared for her husband, who in turn served as the breadwinner for the family. A woman's worth before she got married rested in her chastity. When she got married, the need for sexual activity was acknowledged, but only to serve the species. By and large this meant that women were not allowed to enjoy sexual satisfaction, and if they did, they usually were to blame for the general moral decline of society. Any sexual desires experienced by women were considered to be in contradiction with the proper definition of female virtue. According to *The Physician and Sexuality in Victorian America* by John S. Haller Jr. and Robin M. Haller, sexual promiscuity is an "ominous indication of national decay" (91).

This Victorian view of women's sexuality affected their social position and was closely tied to the middle-class's belief in their own superiority, especially in a time of imperialism, when "colonies" represented the Racial Other. The ideology of the middle-class, domesticated woman did not fit well with reality of working class and poor women, or women of color. These bourgeois assumptions about female sexuality had longevity and are traceable in the Sirkian 1950s melodramas, as well as in contemporary films. Post-war America celebrated a familial and female ideology similar to the Victorian view of women, in pace with consumerism and the rise of suburbia. Again, the rise of the middle-classes immediately after the war had ended generated strict traditional values which gave this class moral authority and superiority over social groups below and above. American culture, especially classical Hollywood films, supported this new way of life of community and family to encourage and uphold strict gender roles for men and women, but some films also challenged this image. In *Imitation of Life* from 1959 we are faced with the class and race distinction through the character of Sarah Jane, who tries to escape her racial identity by passing as white. Being the daughter of a black domestic servant, she fails to live out a prudent, white sexuality. Wanting more out of life, she escapes and ends up dancing in nightclubs and rejecting her mother's legacy, thus she takes on a more promiscuous sexuality. Being trapped between what she is and how she appears, her feeling of subordination cannot be avoided, as she does not have the same possibilities in being black, but yet does not belong to the bourgeois middle-class white group of women either. Thus, what class and what race a woman belonged to made a difference in connection to her sexual identity.

The Victorian Woman was supposed to conform to "the cult of true womanhood" and demonstrate purity, passivity and domesticity. Although the image was fading when women

officially entered the public scene in the early 1900s, working as professional social workers, teachers, white collar clerks, and earning the right to vote, it still loomed large in people's minds in a world that continued to discriminate against women. But as the film industry grew and took shape, women on the screen broke free from the restricted stereotypes. In the flamboyant flapper era of the 1920s, Hollywood's image of acceptable female behavior went through a significant change. At pace with modernity, the films portrayed more and more women in control of their own destinies, not shaped by men. With new hair-cuts and shorter skirts, women danced, smoked and displayed their sexuality to the horror of the former generation.

Women and Consumerism

The rise of the film industry is frequently associated with the rise of consumerism, and in the context of these overlapping areas I will present how closely femininity and consumerism are interlinked. In a historical context, one of the milestones in terms of mass production was Henry Ford's "line production" in 1910. This technology led to a massive surplus of material goods which in turn fostered a rapid development of marketing and advertising strategies in America. The flapper era of the 1920s and the rising expectations of leisure time and sexual liberation did not only affect young women's lives, but also how the advertisers were to maneuver. During the 1920s and through the Depression, the mold for post-war consumer patterns was already being set. Women – and teen-agers in the post-war era – were consumer groups that were given particular attention by the advertisers, as they soon played a key role in the economic growth of American society. The significance of female consumerism in relation to film is discussed in Mary Ann Doane's book *Desire to Desire*, where a radio speech from 1930 is quoted: "The motion picture carries to every American at home, and to millions of potential purchasers abroad, the visual, vivid perception of American manufactured products" (24). With this point of departure, Doane discusses three different instances of the commodity form in its relation to film and female spectatorship. The first point she makes is how film invites women to buy an image of feminine beauty and provides "a space in which to display that feminine body: a car, a house, a room filled with furniture and appliances" (24). Her second argument, however, is related to the specific agreement between the manufacturer and studio, directly tied to placement of brands within the different films and the agreement between the producers and the large film studios. Her last argument concerns around the film itself and the distribution of exchange. The films that came out of

the large studios were pure commercial productions, and thus gave a "moneyman's" perspective of what they thought the audiences wanted to see.

Doane's first argument indicates how the screen visualizes commodities, and how Classic Hollywood Cinema consciously reflected this, selling consumerist dreams of luxury and glamour to the masses. Consumer goods labeled as female were first and foremost fashion, cosmetics and interiors, and the film screen seemed the most appropriate place for the marketing of a certain feminine self-image, especially in the typical "women's films" I discuss in Chapter 3. These types of films centered on the new cultural factor: the rise of the new bourgeoisie and the nuclear family in small-town, suburban America. Life in the suburbs echoed the aesthetics of the Victorian Woman with a sharp distinction of spheres for men and women. Women represented the private sphere, and to have a well-equipped home became the norm and was visualized on the screen. The images or myths of family life that came out of Hollywood displayed extravagant interiors, beautiful homes, and up-to-date and fashionable costumes, and the Sirkian melodramas were no exception. But yet again, how consumerism defined public spaces, for example, in huge department stores, is no less important, but is tied more to the political agenda and American economic policy. This in turn links up to American international business expansion, where the film itself and the distribution and exchange became a significant method with which to spread the "consumer-gospel" to the world. The film's unique status both as a product for mass production, and as an artefact, offers an ideal space for displaying commodities to the masses.

> It is no exaggeration to say that the modern motion picture industry sets the styles for half the world. There is not one of us that isn't aware that the motion picture industry is the most powerful medium for the influencing of people that man ever built (…) We can set new styles of living and the doctrine of production must be made completely popular. Eric Johnson, 1946 (qtd. in L. May 126).

This quote by Eric Johnson, the leader of "The Motion Picture Producer's Association" in 1946, pin-points how closely film and consumerism are linked. In addition, it explains the key role film (and mass culture) plays in creating American ideology, and thus in creating female identity. The female consumer becomes significant in the marketing strategy; consumer statistics from the 1920s and 1930s conveyed how women made 80 to 90 percent of all purchase for family use. "Women's films" like *All that Heaven Allows* and *Imitation of Life*, were closely linked to the commodity form, and fashion and women's appearances are often

mentioned in reviews of the films. These two Sirkian melodramas became instant blockbuster successes in the 1950s, and lucrative products themselves for Universal Studios. The vast majority of Sirk's films celebrate the cultural status quo, as women's roles became increasingly important to the rapidly growing consumer culture and American international business expansion. The independent heroine depicted on the screen in the 1930s did not fully replace the familial image of women. Most often the most ambitious career woman capitulated in the end, and married her antagonist. A paradoxical image of women remained: one independent and the other domestic, the first leading into the second.

Women, Work, and Sexuality in the 1930s

Prior to America entering WW II in 1941, the United States had experienced a decade of economic depression, huge unemployment and strong censorship within the film industry. The Production Code became the norm within the film industry between 1933 and 1934, and shaped how women were depicted on screen.[2] Before this censorship went into full force, women were conceived of as having sexual desire without being freaks or villains or stigmatized as being "unfeminine" (Haskell 91). According to Haskell, the early 1930s was considered a liberated period of cinema. She points to several films made between 1930 and 1933 that represent women's sexuality as a constructive force free of guilt, which serves as a great contrast to the later films and especially the 1940s' femme fatale.

The Depression increased the gap between men and women, as women were forced to give up their jobs for men to take over. Sara M. Evans, a Professor of History at the University of Minnesota, discusses this aspect in *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America*. Here she explains how growing numbers of men entered traditionally female dominated areas within the public arena, such as teaching and social work, and how they quickly dominated higher-level positions within these fields. Women lost their ground within these labor markets in the 1930s, because there were not enough jobs for both sexes. Since it was not expected nor socially accepted for women to act as the breadwinners of the family, married women were particularly marginalized within the labor force. During the 1930s women experienced discrimination in the workforce and a retreat to domesticity, which would become strongly reinforced in the post-war years. Due to economic uncertainty, unpredictable prospects about the future followed. Consequently, the marriage and fertility rates went down

[2] This manifest put restriction on what to be shown on the screen in order to make films suitable for the mass consumption. The Code remained in effect until the 1950s.

to a historical low, “bottoming out in 1932 with a low that would not be reached again until the late 1960s” (Evans 200). The confusing decade of the 1930s lacked a socially sanctioned model of independent female adulthood. The prospect and the realities for resourceful women were frightening. The most significant example of such a character from the screen is Scarlet O’Hara in *Gone With the Wind* (1937). Indeed, this is the story of a woman of great strength overcoming all odds to care for her family and herself. Still, she evidently lost the battle of the sexes, and met her match in an even stronger man to whom she capitulated in the end, and “emerged tamed and transformed” (Evans 198), with the famous last words “tomorrow is another day”.

When America entered WW II in 1941, the economic situation changed dramatically, and several aspects of women’s lives were transformed. New patterns of marriage and childbearing were generated by the revived economy. Both the Selective Service Act, passed in 1940 which shielded fathers from being drafted, and the numerous and hasty “good-bye” marriages prior to men entering the war, initiated the first baby boom that reached new heights after the war. The massive mobilization of the war industry led to job openings literally everywhere, and as the government sent young men into the armed services, the employers had a hard time finding workers to replace them. Together with the industry and the media, they enrolled massive propaganda campaigns to mobilize the work force and to convince women that they should now enter traditionally male dominated blue-collar jobs. Encouraged by the government, millions of women rolled up their sleeves and entered the industrial labor force. The image of the “Angelic Mother” and the discrimination women had suffered in the work force were left behind for a short period of time.

During the war years, American society experienced a massive breakdown of the earlier strict sexual division of labor. Female entry into the labor force had increased since the 1920s, but the work had been strictly allocated by gender. Earlier traditional female work was limited to low-paid domestic service, clerical work, teaching, and social work. Now, through the massive ads and propaganda campaigns, riveting and wiring aircraft were redefined from male to female work, emphasizing that women did not lose their femininity by entering the war industry. “Rosie the Riveter,” a sexually attractive, strong working woman became a national icon and emphasized women’s civic and patriotic duty to work in the traditionally male dominated blue-collar industry. Riveting and wiring were given feminine connotations, because it served the purpose of the nation and those in power. The growth and need of labor was not only limited to industry; the need for labor in the previously female dominated work such as teaching and clerical work increased. According to Evans, a nationwide teacher

shortage led to a permanent withdrawal of the prohibitions on the employment of married women, a law passed in several states during the Depression (223).[3]

The film noir genre emerged in the 1940s and portrayed a world of darkness, crime and corruption. Sylvia Harvey suggests how these films "reflect such social changes as the increasing entry of women into the labor market" (Belton 172). The appearance of these films suggests that they exploited the changing roles of women in war time and post-war America, and gave expression to the rise and fall of the nationalistic ideologies generated by the war. Further, Harvey explains how the "two most common types of women in film noir are the exciting, childless whores, and the boring, potentially childbearing sweethearts" (175). In film noir, women came across in a whole new way, which reflected the changes in their social position. This specific period of American film history depicted dissatisfaction, a sense of loss and alienation, most evident through the mise-en-scène or the visual style of these films, shot in all shades of black, most often in dark alleys and nocturnal surroundings. The family aspect and the failure of developing a traditional romantic relationship are almost totally absent, which is emphasized in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950). This particular film noir portrays a bewildered Hollywood silent film star, Norma Desmond, in decay. The fallen and forgotten film star never married, probably because she was too preoccupied with building a career. She keeps a monkey as a substitute for a child. In addition, the story subtly indicates that she keeps the male protagonist as a "slave". Female sexuality in film noir was portrayed both as a powerful and yet dangerous and destructive force, in a time when female sexuality was defined safely within the boundaries of marriage and stability. Female sexual relations outside this institution were considered as a destructive force, "a male fantasy (…) playing a man's game in a man's world" (Haskell 190).

[3] Black women suffered under segregation and were virtually excluded from the high-paid industrial jobs. Predominately these women had worked as domestic servants, but now they sought to enter what used to be white female job positions, clerical work and nursing.

“The Backlash” – Back to the Home

Soon after WW II America went through a tremendous change in demography and family structure, which affected middle-class women’s lives. A yearning for security and stability across every generation, class and race swept over the continent. And within this pursuit of domesticity, marriage rates and birthrates skyrocketed. Bulldozers cleared huge areas outside the cities for the growing middle-class families to establish themselves. The G.I. Bill allowed war veterans cheap loans and as a result, row after row of people owning their own home became the norm within the rapidly growing middle-class.

The new suburbia required numerous consumerist goods and different electrical devices. The new female mission was to oversee and maintain the quality of the private life and to purchase wisely. Exaggerated campaigns were focused on convincing women to be happy in the reasserted domesticity. It almost seemed as if Americans were trying to convince themselves that despite the enormous changes in women’s roles and lives, nothing was actually changing. This tense atmosphere in the new suburbia is dramatized in Steven Daldry’s film, *The Hours* (2002), discussed in more depth in Chapter 3. Here, the Californian housewife Laura Brown, played by Julianne Moore, fights her “demons”. Not only does she struggle to conform to the strict moral conventions in her community, she also seeks her own personal freedom at the expense of her domestic arena. Married to a war veteran aided by the GI Bill, she strives to become perfectly content as a traditional wife and a mother who needs nothing more than her well equipped home and family.

To squeeze women out of the blue-collar work force traditionally allocated to men, new propaganda campaigns began to appear, highlighting the temporary nature of women’s newfound position within the work force. Now with a new twist, the campaigns emphasized women’s patriotic duty to give the returning war-veterans their jobs back. “Rosie the Riveter” was from the very beginning conceived as a temporary phenomenon by the advertisers. A massive mobilization through television, film, radio and magazine ads told women that soon, they would return joyfully to their homemaking, and care for their husbands and children. Surveys and polls revealed that “82% of the women intended to continue working” (Evans 230). Despite this, women experienced a tremendous pressure to accept their more traditional roles as wives and mothers.

A newfound obsession of returning women back into the home rushed over the continent, and thus films were used in the service of propaganda. Through media and the film

industry, women were yet again encouraged to enjoy household duties, do the laundry and attend housekeeping classes with great enthusiasm. Women's magazines and films pictured women in work uniforms rushing home to put on fancy feminine dresses, matching aprons and high heels, ready to serve their families dinner. Those in power yet again defined what was considered feminine values.

Motherhood and domesticity was yet again essential to U.S. politics and the economy, this time filled with a nationalist purpose. It was not the first time that motherhood provided the female version of civic virtue. Back in the years of the American Revolution, American political ideology had held motherhood responsible for the nurturing of proper future citizens. What gave rise to the widespread support of this familial consensus in the post-war era? At the same time as the war effort gave women's contribution a patriotic cause, the post-war years and the retreat to domesticity sought to fill a national purpose. Family stability became a crucial defense and served as a bulwark against the nuclear threat. In my thinking about this matter, I draw on Elaine Tyler May article *Explosive Issues: Sex, Women, and the Bomb,* where she argues that "profound connections existed among anxieties over sexual roles, the cold war, and a bourgeoning family ideology" (155). She points specifically to the writings of professionals and describes post-war America as an era of experts. The "science" aspect of motherhood is discussed in more depth later, where the fears of a female sexuality out of control were articulated through professional writings.

Despite the glossy and shining image of women, the true picture the returning war veterans were faced with were wives who had become more assertive, confident and less dependent than they were prior to the war. Women had discovered that they could manage men's jobs and take care of parts of the household that had traditionally belonged to men. Faced with more confident women, American government and businesses continued to create large campaigns to sweep women's newly achieved self-reliance under the carpet. The political focus during wartime had only one purpose – victory, not securing women's chances for upward mobility in the professional working life or in the social world. When women came to realize the temporary nature of their position, they suffered a major backlash, and became "utterly confused, uncertain and discontent with the present definition of women's place in America" (Margaret Mead in Evans 235). Tension and feelings of loss are all unmistakably evident in the four films represented in this thesis, where the leading female characters struggle with a sense of failure in living up to the expectations from others and from themselves. The woman-driven films in question raise important questions regarding

female identity, and they dramatize how women find themselves torn between their respective families and communities, giving the “feminine mystique” a filmic face.

The “Kitchen Debate”

Feminism and female public participation became utterly suspect in the chilled post-war atmosphere. After the war, America established itself as a world power. Thus the political agenda became more focused on foreign policy, which generated a new style of nationalism. One of the consequences of this newfound political position was aggressive assaults against communists and suspected communist behavior within the United States. America felt threatened by Russia, and defended Western Europe from Russian expansion. In 1959 Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushcev were engaged in the so called “kitchen debate”, which revealed the importance of gender and sexuality within politics. At the opening of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, the two political leaders fought the Cold War over consumer goods rather than nuclear weapons. While Nixon celebrated the virtues of the American way of life, Khrushcev promoted the communist system. As Elaine Taylor May interestingly points out in *Homeward Bound*, American economic superiority rested on the ideal of the suburban home, complete with modern appliances and distinct gender roles for family members. Nixon declared the essence of the American freedom to a male breadwinner and a fulltime female homemaker content with having a variety of consumer goods. Furthermore, the Vice President insisted that American superiority in the Cold War rested not on weapons, but on a secure family life modeled on suburbia. Consumerism contributed to individuality, leisure, and upward mobility. Whilst the Soviet Union took pride in productive female workers, America wanted to make life easier for the housewives: “Successful breadwinners supporting attractive homemakers in affluent suburban homes” (E. May 18). The Nixon visit was considered a political triumph: “the appliance-leaden ranch-style home epitomized the expansive, secure lifestyle that post-war America wanted” (18). Suburbia was to serve as “the bulwark against communism and class conflict” (20). Nixon described a domestic life that had become the reality for many Americans, and a possible aspiration for many more. Nixon’s message was that everyone deserved a piece of the American Dream.

The American media followed Nixon’s gospel and described the Soviet working women as desexualized and anti-feminine creatures. The media described Moscow as “a city

of women – hard-working women – who show few of the physical charms of the women in the West" (19). Thanks to the wonders of American capitalism and household appliances, American women did not have to be hard-working. The home was where women were fully supported, and the place where freedom was achieved. Accordingly, anti-communist crusaders, who had their heyday in the 1950s, viewed women who did not conform to their domestic ideal with utter suspicion. I find that all films in question reflect on this chilled post-war atmosphere and thus dramatize the political implications that rested on the nuclear family. Thus the kitchen debate serves as an important metaphor of the fifties as a prosperous, yet a claustrophobic era.

Motherhood as "Science"

Post-war America has been labeled as the period of "containment," and the country experienced a paradigm shift both on the domestic scene and in intellectual life. Earlier in this chapter I have discussed how the private household again was viewed as "the heaven in a heartless world" and how women were expected to embody self-sacrificing roles as wives and mothers. As in the war years, American advertising and media became obsessed with depicting the transformation of women's expectations and their social roles. This obsession, however, also infiltrated the academic scene and the post-war years marked a heightening of the status of the professional. This phenomenon resulted in scientific measurement of female behavior and female public participation. Elaine Tyler May rightfully labels the post-war America as "the era of experts" (155). Faith in scientific wizardry leaked into popular culture as well as into intellectual thought. In extension of the Victorian values of female domesticity, Freudian psychoanalysis created the basis to support the leading notion of women's virtues in the 1950s. Questions were raised about how Hitler could develop such a cruel personality, and motherhood was to blame. The mother was regarded as the emotional center of the home and responsible for childcare. Further, the mother was fully to blame for the physical and emotional weakness of young men who were not fit to join the army. The enormous physical harm a mother could cause her children if she chose to work was echoed by prominent scholars, and thus became an established "fact". The non-working housewife became the ideal norm for women to follow, and several articles concerning the subject of motherhood were published in newspapers and magazines. A book that is frequently referred to within this perspective is Farnheim and Lundberg's *The Modern Women and the Lost Sex* (1947). The thesis of this book is that the ills of the world are due to women's effort to become men. They

argued the great harm of women working outside the home and how this was closely connected to how women could "seriously damage [their] husband's sexual capacity". The book stated that feminism was a deep illness rooted in penis envy.

The independent woman was a contradiction in terms, and women became the scapegoats of most social problems. The domestic ideology for women was to be feminine, and femininity was closely related to "the housewife- mother, the suburban goddess, all entwined as the newly written script for women" (Campell and Kean 214). These assumptions about femininity are traceable in Sirk's film *Imitation of Life,* which looks at the issue of women working outside the home, "a housewife's rise to financial success and her realization that money can't buy happiness, only family can" (Byars 239). This film depicts the general notion of how "unnatural" it was for women to seek ambition and a career, and the potential harm it might cause the children.

An important question to pose in the context of exploring women's roles and motherhood in the 1950s is whether women seemed satisfied with domesticity as their sole purpose in life. Is the historical picture that is painted one dimensionally based on assumptions made by middle-class female scholars in the 1970s and 1980s? A vast majority of social studies have questioned the emotional costs of women's exclusive involvement in motherhood. A research report in sociology: *Motherhood, Multiple Roles, and Maternal Well-Being: Women of the 1950s* (1991), at Cornell University examines the effects of social integration (number of roles occupied) on the psychological well-being of American women who were wives and mothers of young children in the 1950s. The findings from this study points to how women's well-being has to be viewed in a larger context and states further that women not working were not entirely cut off from the larger society as the general impression might indicate. Notably, the report states that many women were content in their positions as housewives and concludes that women involved in volunteer activities parallel to their duties in the home scored high on their sense of general life satisfaction and self-esteem. But again, there is an important class distinction here, which tells how women from the lower middle-class with little or no education were more content as housewives than the women with a college degree.

Closing Remarks

In this chapter I have sought to place the changing roles of feminine values and female sexuality in a historical and cultural context. Since the industrial revolution, America had witnessed progress, modernity, depression, chaos, and war. In the post-war era, women faced extreme pressure to retreat to domesticity and to bury their patriotic and public activities of the war years in the enclosed safety of the home. Campell and Keen's *American Cultural Studies* describe the 1950s as an era where "Gender offered pre-set compartments into which male and female could be arranged so to create a sense of 'normalcy' and order that were non-threatening and in keeping with precise, uncomplicated versions of an ideal America developed in these years of consensus" (212). At the same time that women were needed in the work force, they were encouraged to return to domesticity. Clearly, women in the 1950s were given mixed signals. These conflicting forces suggest "a split character of the age" (212), and gave rise to confusing social patterns and gender identities. At the rise of consumerism, women were bombarded with contradictory cultural and political messages. The major backlash women suffered tended to be difficult to adjust to, and the sense of isolation in the homes created a female trend of life that many felt hard to adjust to. "Rosie the Riveter" gradually became the depressed housewife, feeling confused in her newfound middle-class position, and the expectations that followed. Although a great deal of women were satisfied as housewives, as the research report *Motherhood, Multiple Roles, and Maternal Well-Being* indicates, many felt bewildered and lost. This state of mind later became known as "the problem that has no name," first defined in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) by Betty Friedan. I find Friedan's contribution important to this thesis, as she represented the white, middle-class woman, trapped in suburbia. Friedan was college-educated and clearly uncomfortable in her role as a full time housewife and a mother. In the early phase of her work, the seeds of female post-war discontent were sown as she discovered that many of her equals were just as dissatisfied with their own lives. The book's thesis was that women were victims of a system of delusions and false values that urged them to find their fulfillment and identity through their husbands and children, not through themselves. Women had to learn a new set of conventions in order to be accepted within the new suburban middle-class, radically different from earlier. Nonetheless, there is an important class distinction that I find

the research report is underlining: the higher educated the women were, the more bewildered they felt in their newfound position in the home.

Having sketched out a few central elements of the social scene faced by post-war women, I will in the next chapter discuss how these elements became visualized within the popular culture on screen in the post-war years. The family melodrama that began to take shape in the 1940s and 1950s articulated many of these contradictory themes of womanhood, motherhood, and child-care, touching on issues of gender, race, class, and sexuality. Like Friedan's housewives, who sought more than domestic duties, the women in the films I will discuss yearned for a deeper dimension in life. The plots were concerned with different roles and expectations of women in white, middle-class suburbia, and dealt with themes of motherhood, love on equal terms, work outside the home, and sexual frustrations. "Studied over time, films aimed at female audiences particularly demonstrate contemporary changes in views about the agency of the housewife" (Lloyd and Johnson 8). Some of these conflicting forces concerning femininity and sexuality were debated in the cultural realm of the 1950s and 1960s, and also took place in the Hollywood's 1950s melodramas and the films that will be analyzed in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3: Film Analysis

Melodrama has been a significant genre within the film industry from an early stage and has traditionally been labeled as typical "women's films" or "women's weepers", closely associated with a female audience. These films commonly reflect upon "soft values" concerning women's issues, most often with the nuclear bourgeois family at its center. The melodramas by Douglas Sirk, including *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) and *Imitation of Life* (1959), belong to a distinctive canon of films made and released in the U.S. in the 1950s.[4] Many film scholars proclaim Sirk's films as the ultimate form of the film melodrama genre, a complex genre debate this thesis has little room for. According to Mercer and Shingler's work on melodrama, film scholars define the genre as a dramatic narrative with musical accompaniment to mark the emotional effects (7). The label melodrama can be delineated in terms of thematic and form, focusing on family matters and matters of sexuality in small-town America.

The German immigrant Douglas Sirk was hired by Universal Studios in the late 1940s to make film versions out of "women's magazine's stories," and his films became instant blockbuster successes. The films produced in the studio system were made for a mass audience and to serve a pure, commercial interest. The directors that were hired by the large studios were expected to serve commercial interests only, which to some extent could collide with their artistic nature. The "director's dilemma," how to make a personal expression without disquieting the commercial interests of the studio, was widespread in Hollywood, and Sirk was no exception.[5]

What this chapter seeks to investigate is how the two above-mentioned films from the 1950s and two contemporary films set in the same time period comment on post-war American ideology and culture. The highly praised *Far From Heaven*, directed by Todd Haynes (2002), and *The Hours* (2002), directed by Stephen Daldry, serve as contemporary contributions to the melodrama genre so common in the 1950s. These latter contributions to the genre are interesting to investigate, as they criticize aspects of society that should have been changed over the years, but arguably still remain the same today. By comparing and contrasting contemporary films and Sirk's films, I am interested in discussing how the

[4] Vincent Minelli (*Some Came Running*) and Nicolas Ray (*Rebel Without a Cause)* were also significant directors for the Hollywood melodrama cinema. They projected complex and and paradoxical views of America and thus questioned the attitudes of the mass audiences.

[5] The director's dilemma is discussed in more depth in Martin Scorsese's three hour long documentary, *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese Through American Movies* (1995).

different filmmakers have negotiated the ideology of female domesticity, motherhood and sexuality wrapped up in the "feminine mystique" of the 1950s.

Although this selection of films share many of the same plot trajectories and complex use of mise-en-scène, the stories are somewhat different. Sirk's sense of alienation and lost opportunities are echoed in the contemporary films, which open onto the social and historical perspectives discussed in Chapter 2. The longings and disappointments of the main female characters, Cathy, Lora, Cary, and Laura respectively, reflect the assumptions of female multiple roles within the rigid conventions of the domestic revival in the post war years [6]. Although the films are clearly organized around the female protagonists, male characters are no less significant for the plot, especially in light of the paradoxes that men and women experienced in this time period. Deeply inspired by Sirk's 1950s melodramas, *Far From Heaven* (2002) travels back in time and explores post-war American hypocrisy and moral conventions. Whereas *The Hours* (2002) explores ambivalent sexualities and suicide, both films share elements from the "old-school" melodramatic tradition, inherited from Sirk. The female leads come across as both victims and heroines who are at odds with 1950s conventions.

By and large, this chapter seeks to analyze specific sections of the films in question, and more generally comment on how the female leads and their dilemmas depict the ideological and cultural issues discussed in Chapter 2. Overall, this key chapter will argue that the selected films expose the tensions and contradictions that lie beneath the surface of the post-war American way of life. In my discussion of *All That Heaven Allows*, I will address issues of class and consumption in the 1950s. Furthermore, I will analyze scenes from *Imitation of Life* in the context of motherhood discussed in Chapter 2. *Far From Heaven* and *The Hours* both come across as more explicit on the issues of sexuality and sexual relations than their earlier counterparts, and thus raise important questions about sexuality and the strict 1950s mechanisms of sexual control. The contemporary films give an interesting point of departure on how past and present are conflated, in other words how *Far From Heaven's* and *The Hours'* retrospective looks are applicable to contemporary assumptions of gender ideology, motherhood, and social pressure.

[6] Laura Brown is one out of three female protagonists in *The Hours*, and the only character this thesis will discuss in depth.

Douglas Sirk and the Melodrama Genre

During the aftermath of the counterculture and the rise of the feminist critique in the 1970s, the melodramas by the German immigrant Douglas Sirk were "rediscovered," and the motives in his films were interpreted in a whole new way across race, class and gender lines. Mercer and Shingler's work *Melodrama: Genre, Style, Sensibility* (2004) is an interesting contribution to the subject of the melodrama genre in film, stating that "Melodrama, like film noir, is a critical category that emerges as a consequence of the identification of a range of films (largely made in the 1940s and 1950s) which use the family and the social position of women as their narrative focus" (2). In essence, the Mercer and Shingler argue that there is no fixed definition of melodrama, besides that the word 'melos' literally means music, and has the suffix 'drama'. Music played a significant part in the early American cinema in the silent films. Films relied on live musical accompaniment for punctuation that could compensate for the lack of spoken dialogue. In short, the elements of drama and music made it into the sound cinema, and became significant qualities of filmic expression. Furthermore, Mercer & Shingler claim that the melodrama genre still has the "ability to engage, stimulate and entertain its audience, to tears and joy and sadness" (8). Thus, the genre is not comparable with a single filmic form, but serves more as an umbrella term that embraces different types of films, and applies to an expanding canon of films that emerged in Hollywood in the 1950s. In the following, this chapter will analyze films that have traditionally been labeled as "family melodrama" and the "maternal melodrama" most significant for the 1950s.

Thomas Schatz's work on *Hollywood Genres* (1981) assigns Douglas Sirk and his 1950s films a privileged role within the "family melodrama". The basic model for a family melodrama centers on the conflicts and tensions in the middle-class family, most often in a repressive small-town environment, and concerns itself with women and children. According to Schatz, the melodrama survived the Eisenhower years and into the era of the counterculture, but still, "the distinctive spirit of the '50s melodramas was lost in the transition" (224). By the 1960s, the genre had lost out to day-time, commercial television series, the large scale film studio's biggest rival, such as soap operas and prime time domestic drama. Still, the tearjerkers from Sirk were rediscovered by modernist, feminist, and Marxist film critics from the 1970s and onwards because they seemed to capture the paradoxes of the American 1950s. Schatz points to the interesting point about how this specific canon of films has received the status as "the most socially self-conscious and covertly 'anti-American' films

ever produced by the Hollywood studios" (225). Many of the films from this era had one obvious purpose: to uplift the audience and reaffirm their traditional values, whereas instead, many of the films subtly questioned the American values, and thus criticized the American Dream. Codified within the Melodrama genre, Sirk managed to stretch the boundaries and leave a specific mark on his films, commenting on how consumerism, home, and family could not always bring fulfillment in a woman's life. Social critiques of this kind were also evident in the literary canon of this particular period of time, for example J.D. Sallinger's ground breaking novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, and Arthur Miller's dramas such as *Death of a Salesman.* Beneath the contained, small-town American surface, there was a rage amongst the adolescence as well. This rage is depicted in *The Rebel without a Cause,* which depicts the similar discontent as among middle-class housewives.

Sirk's films in particular revolve around the conflict between female desire for independence and choice on the one hand, and what the family or community desires on the other. Haynes's modern contribution to the 1950s melodrama, deeply inspired by Douglas Sirk, discusses more explicit sexual tensions than Sirk's films do. Both Haynes and Daldry discuss aspects of sexuality that would have been impossible in the 1950s due to the aftermaths of the influence of the Production Code. Sirk's films from the 1950s and Haynes's and Daldry's modern contribution to the melodrama genre have both become academic touchstones, defining how melodrama should be understood within film studies and film theory. Sirk's use of complex and ironic mise-en-scène suggests a "critique of bourgeois ideology that reveals wider conflicts and tensions that manifest themselves through the dominant cinema of the period" (Mercer & Shingler 40). It is important to emphasize that Sirk's films are atypical melodramas. He deliberately used an extravagant style and technique to criticize American society, and instead of celebrating the American success ethic, he bent the existing rules by using Hollywood conventions to question parts of America in the 1950s. The most prominent example of "bending" the rules is the irony traced in the happy endings and in the titles of his films: "The distinction between depths and shallowness in his characters is central to Sirk and to the critique of American life these films reflect" (Harvey 53). According to Sirk in an interview with Jon Halliday from 1971, he was deeply fascinated by the melodrama in the American sense: "[…] what used to take the place in the world of kings and princes has since transposed into the world of bourgeoisie" (Halliday 95). And the American melodrama allowed him to explore this. His directing career was extensive and diverse, but what is now regarded as the distinctive Sirkian style was to be fully realized during his years at Universal Studios in the 1950s.

The four films that are included in this thesis all fit the broad definition of melodrama as they all depict women victimized by repressive and unfair social circumstances. Cary, the well-off widow in *All That Heaven Allows*, strives against the strict division of class in her uptight suburban environment when she falls in love with her gardener, who evidently does not belong to the appropriate class. *Imitation of Life* examines the issue of women's restricted opportunities at several levels, for example, women working outside the home and female friendship between women who are of different races. *Far From Heaven* refers to gender, race and sexuality, and stands, according to critics and the director himself, as a modern tribute to the melodramas of Douglas Sirk. Furthermore, the film depicts a growing consumer consciousness regarding housewives, strongly connected to their duties within the private sphere of the home. *The Hours* is a melodrama with post-modernistic features, dealing with the connecting lives of three different women and their struggles in terms of sexuality, gender issues, and moral conventions, mostly on a psychological level. I have included this film in my thesis mainly because of the aesthetics of the 1950s suburbia, where Julianne Moore (in a role similar to the one she played in *Far From Heaven*) portrays a depressed housewife struggling, and failing to conform to her suburban existence. The film joggles past present themes, and thus indicate how past and present are conflated. This dimension highlights the argument of this thesis which is to discuss how women have suffered under contradictory images that increased within the domestic sphere in the post-war years. Furthermore, this post-war legacy still looms large within the institution of the family.

All That Heaven Allows

All That Heaven Allows is considered to be the first film in which Douglas Sirk was able to fully realize the potential for his social critique of America. In a BBC interview from 1979, Sirk expressed that while working on *All That Heaven Allows*, he tried to make the best out of a rather poor story, from a script handed to him by Universal Studios.[7] By means of his visual style and filmic techniques, he was able to put his own signature on the material, "bending" it to fit his interpretations of post war American society. According to Paul Willeman's work on Sirk, *Towards an Analysis of the Sirkian System*, some key features of his filmic style are as follows: "[Sirk] depicted a society which seemed to be strong and healthy, but which in fact was exhausted and torn apart by collective neuroses" (qtd. in Mercer and Shingler 133). His

[7] This is discussed in more depth in a rare television interview of Sirk from 1979, made for the BBC *Arena*, a documentary profile of his life and career, *Behind the Mirror: A profile of Douglas Sirk.*

deliberate use of visual symbols, extravagant use of color and the use of long shots gave the film set a stage-like impression, making the characters and the surroundings look more real than life itself, which on several occasions reaches a point of parody. Furthermore, Sirk manipulated the conventions of the exaggerated sentimental Universal Studios melodramas, originally made to uplift the audiences, and managed to delicately reveal the unease and neuroses hidden beneath the surface of the respectable post-war society. Although this thesis will not go in depth when it come to the narrative structure of the film, I will, however, present a few scenes that stand out and allude to the conventions of the 1950s white, middle-class community.

All That Heaven Allows, starring Jane Wyman and Rock Hudson, depicts the growing love affair between Cary and Ron, a love story seemingly against all odds. The female protagonist Cary is a wealthy, white middle-class widow who is in the process of redefining her social and sexual identity, by searching for a new husband to care for now that her two grown children are ready to leave their home and start a life of their own. Struggling with the pressure from her community and her close family, she is at risk of losing her social dignity when she falls for a man from a lower social class. Cary comes across as a mature woman, somewhat at odds with her own society, seeking a new and more meaningful dimension in her life. The opening sequence shows an idyllic image of suburban America, and through Sirk's lens the viewers are soon introduced to Cary's well-equipped and affluent New England home. Sirk's eminent use of interior and design might signify an agreement between the corporate companies and the large film studios to sell the consumerists dreams of luxury and glamour to the masses. But still, to have a well-equipped home reflected the American way of life, and in that manner, the bourgeois home of Cary puts her in the "right" social stratum. Accompanied by romantic music, so common for the melodrama genre, Cary soon falls for her gardener Ron Kirby, a young and highly unconventional man. Ron works with his bare hands, which strongly indicates that he belongs to the working class. With this potential love affair Cary – who socializes in the local country club – risks a potential scandal. Thus, the plot demonstrates the destructive influence of a conservative New England community, which finds the widow's open expression of sexual desire for her gardener "too hot to handle". The community and her children both react in the same manner; they strongly reject her choice of a partner and show little understanding for her happiness outside their upper-middle-class environment. For this reason, *All That Heaven Allows* is rather clear in its critique of the dominant 1950s codes regarding class and sexuality, intensified by the conflict between true love and social conventions. This is most evident through Ron's freethinking character and

how he constantly criticizes the self-satisfied consumer culture Cary takes an active part in. Sirk explains his choice of Ron's stable and direct character like this: "in melodrama it's of advantage to have one immovable character against which you can put your more split ones" (Halliday 98). Ron comes across as totally unaffected by the social environment, and serves as Cary's perfect foil, as she is more split in her search for a new identity and a passionate relationship. Although she is attracted to Ron, she has serious doubts and she feels bewildered by the pressures from her community and close family. One of the paradoxes in the film is how the seemingly free thinking radical Ron soon adapts to paternalistic attitudes expecting Cary to fully capitulate to him and choose his path and lifestyle.

The class distinction between the lovers is one of the key motifs in the film and falls under the constructed pattern of visual and thematic opposition in the film. This dimension is established early, already in the second scene when Ron offers to help Cary by carrying a big box of dishes. Here, the viewers are introduced to his character for the first time, and through his looks he comes across as plain, practical, and earthy, and thus serving as a strong contrast to Cary's chic charisma. A quick glimpse of his car, a van, and his practical outfit, establish the material and social differences and thus indicate a contrast to Cary's dead husband's status. Also the age difference is significant for the plot, as Ron comes across as thirty something and Cary forty something. After having put down the dishes, Cary offers Ron lunch in her garden. At first the conversation between them is slow, and Ron is seemingly arrogant in his chatter. Finally, he starts to talk about things he really cares for, his affection for trees: "This may be my last year, at agriculture school I got interested in trees. So I started growing them." He continues to say that the tree "only can thrive near a home where there's love". Soon their conversation takes on a personal dimension and their mutual attraction becomes clear to the audience. As the film and its plot develop, Ron's agricultural education will mean little to Cary's family and friends. Ron and Cary's mutual attraction is scandalous as he chooses to work with his hands and live outside the established community, in an old mill somewhere in the country-side.

At a later stage in the film, Cary is introduced to Ron's friends, Mick and Alida, and their alternative lifestyle. This part of the film is interesting in a historical and cultural context as it functions as a great contrast to Cary's shallow, suburban social circle and the values it embraces. Instead of living the ambitious life of corporate advertising in the city, Mick and Alida have chosen to live in a simple and natural environment, so that they have time to read

American classics, such as Walt Whitman *Leaves of Grass* and Thoreau's *Walden*.[8] In this manner, the couple's "alternative" lifestyle introduces the audience to a more individual and free thinking way of life. This crowd can be viewed as pre-hippies or representatives of the Beat generation that opposed the rigid cultural values of the 1950s. This indicates that there were forces in the 1950s that actively tried to fight against the rigid moral conventions of that time.

In addition, the film also demonstrates the futility of maternal sacrifice, as Cary's life is rigidly controlled by the expectation of her children. Molly Haskell's work on maternal melodrama and women's films, *From Reverence to Rape*, finds that the motif of maternal sacrifice is clearly evident in many classical Hollywood films. "Children are an obsession in American movies – sacrifice of and for children, the use of children as justification for all manner of sacrifice […]" (168). This is a marked contrast to European films, where children are absent from the romantic intrigue, an aspect that will be discussed in contrast to *Far From Heaven* and *The Hour*s, where the children play an almost trivial part, seemingly insignificant to the plot. In *All That Heaven Allows* Cary's two college-age children play essential parts, and they accuse her of the "crime" of openly feeling lust, desire, and love for a younger man of a lower social class. This in turn indicates the rigid 1950's codes of proper sexual behavior. Lust and sexuality were not for women past a certain age and certain social position to have. Consequently, Cary's children nearly force their mother to choose between Ron and them, a choice that is difficult for Cary to make. But eventually she yields and sacrifices the possibility for true love in order not to jeopardize her children's prospects for the future. Behind her back, or ignorant to Cary's needs, the son has decided to sell the house. The children successively underline that they do not need her anymore, thus totally undermining her as a free individual when they make decisions on her behalf, treating her as a juvenile. Cary, as several critics have pointed out, herself becomes a victim: "oppressed by the rigid codes of her society, by her gender position as a widow, wife and mother, by the restrictions placed upon her by her family and by her own attitudes" (63). Cary is presented as the ultimate feminine, American woman of the 1950s white middle-class, torn between her own personal needs versus what is expected from her.

The television scene in *All That Heaven Allows* stands out and has been widely commented on by scholars and critics. This specific scene is pivotal in many ways. First, Cary painfully realizes that her children do not need her anymore, when they shamelessly try to

[8] Sirk makes an explicit link to the 19th century's transcendentalism and their passionate belief in individualism and classical liberal principles.

replace her loss of love with a television set that she strongly objects to. Second, the TV set symbolizes the "last refugee of the lonely woman" (Mercer & Shingler 65) and is not only a substitute for companionship, but also as a poor substitute for a real life. Third, this scene functions as a strong social critique underlining the emptiness of consumerism, the backbone of the American society. The television sales man wheels in the TV with the words: "All you have to do is to turn that dial and you have all the company that you want, right there on the screen – drama, comedy, life's parade at your fingertips". These lines denote how easily Cary can escape real life and the challenges and temptations reality offers. Furthermore, the scene illustrates Sirk's effective use of mirrors and reflections as a filmic device when Cary sees her own choking reflection in the TV screen. The television set she so strongly objects to throughout the film functions as a symbol of how trapped she feels in her own home, and reminds her of the pointless sacrifice she has made in order to please her children and her social circle. Finally, as several scholars have pointed out, Sirk might have included this scene to comment on the new competition the day-time television series posed to the Classical Hollywood Cinema and melodrama films in particular.[9]

The destructive power of American middle-class ideology is even more evident towards the end of *All That Heaven Allows*, when Ron is crippled in an accident upon Cary's decision to return his love, against all odds. Struggling with her decision-making, she goes right back to marriage and domesticity, nursing Ron back to health, and thus the seemingly happy ending leads Cary to her proper place within the domestic sphere. The ending mimics the same irony so evident in *Imitation of Life* (1959), discussed in the next section. In both films, Sirk is able "to condemn the narrow codes that confine female desire and female subjectivity" (Kaplan 177). The female characters seem almost unable to escape their conditions, and the seemingly happy endings are in reality pessimistic in their outlook. Here, Sirk reaches a point of parody through his strict use of mise-en-scène, especially in the last scene where the artificial panorama of the old mill reveals a tame deer outside the window. As Douglas Sirk underlines in his interview with Jon Halliday, the key to his principal style of address is deeply, consistently and fundamentally ironic. Irony is "a figure of speech, in which the intended meaning is the opposite of that expressed by the words used [what is expressed on the screen]; usually taking the form of sarcasm or ridicule in which laudatory expressions are used to imply condemnation or contempt".[10] This aspect becomes evident when Sirk leads us to the opposite conclusions that can be drawn from the expected meaning of his

[9] Martin Scorcese's film: *A Personal Journey Through American Movies* points to this aspect.
[10] The definition of the term is quoted from www.oed.com, the Oxford English Dictionary online.

melodramas. By a deliberate use of specific techniques that work to oppose our expectations, he manages to create a secondary meaning to his artificial scenes. The strict use of color, the Technicolor effect, is one of Sirk's ironic devices, creating a false reality, but also the use of the "unhappy" happy endings, when all Cary has fought for throughout the film is shattered, but still she seems pleased with her newfound position.

Imitation of Life

Imitation of Life (1959) is Sirk's final film for Universal and yet again Sirk tells a story with many layers, focusing on women's participation in the public sphere, failed motherhood and racial restrictions. The film is a remake of an earlier film with the same title from 1934, which is based on a novel.[11] Again, Sirk is "bending" the script to shed light on certain aspects of his contemporary society, to which he strongly objects. His comments on American society touch on aspects of consumerism, materialism, prosperity, ambition, racial discrimination and most importantly, motherhood and women's limited choices.

This film deals with two mother-daughter pairs, one black and one white, and thus discusses women's great effort to survive in a male-dominated world where men represent the structures of power. The main character is Lora, who is contrasted with Annie, a black domestic servant. Besides the color of their skin, both women share much of the same destiny; they are both mothers in need of a job in order to support their children, and both women are indirectly blamed for parental inadequacy. The two women are brought together merely by accident early in the film, and they soon develop a friendship and companionship based on the master/servant principle. Somehow they become mutually dependent on one another, one in need of shelter, and the other in need of help in the domestic arena. Annie becomes Lora's devoted servant, housekeeper and mother figure to Lora's daughter, and gains complete control over Lora's domestic sphere. This gives Lora the possibility to fight her way out in the "man's world", building up her career as a Broadway actress, which leads to success and economic independence. Her success story fits well into the image of the "American Dream"; aided by the "right" color of her skin, she rises from rags to riches. While Lora is out in the work force building up a strong line of business, she sacrifices her relationship with both her daughter Susie and her one true love, Steve. Lora has given her daughter all the material

[11] Fanny Hurst novel *Imitation of Life* was first published in 1933. Both the film and the novel were regarded as "the most shameless tearjerker of the fall" by the *New York Time* critique (Kaplan 163).

goods a young girl can dream of, except from nurture and care. Steve, on the other hand, cannot fully love Lora and simultaneously accept her professional life. At an early stage in the film, Steve warns Lora of the danger of choosing a career: Steve: "Oh, stop acting!" Lora: "I am not acting! I want to achieve something… Something you will never understand." Here Lora realizes how Steve wishes to control her life. Steve: "What you are after isn't real." Steve underlines the leading notion of the post-war American society, believing that a woman choosing work outside the home poses a great threat to manhood and is regarded as unsafe. Lora continues: "At least I am after something!". Here, Lora is indicating how Steve has given up his artist's dream to work for a advertising company, solely for commercial purposes. Steve continues: "You are not a child anymore…", indicating that his choices are mature and responsible, as opposed to Lora's naïve focus. Just like Cary's children in *All That Heaven Allows,* Steve treats Lora as a juvenile, not capable of making the right decisions for herself and for her daughter.

The first three-quarters of *Imitation of Life* focus on Lora's rise from rags to riches, but near the end her string of success begins to lose its attraction when Steve returns to the story. The more Lora scales the ladder of success, the more she fails in the realm of motherhood and domesticity. Although Lora bridges this gap with the help from Annie, she cannot seem to escape her maternal duties. At the very end of the film, Lora finally gives in in order to meet the demands from her daughter and Steve, and is seemingly content with her choice, as she tries to fulfill the self-sacrificing role of Annie who has died. The ending is pivotal when Lora finally gives in to love and decides to marry Steve, and thus gives up her career. It is not until this point – Annie's funeral – that Lora fully acts out the mothering role, comforting the grieving Sarah Jane and holding her daughter Susan's hand, showing the feminine qualities of care and affection. The whole scene reminds Lora of the troubled relationship she has with her own daughter. The underlying meaning is how easily a neglected child might choose the wrong path in life, and how the mother is to blame. Lora needs to return to domesticity, or else she might do great harm to her family. Thus, Lora is turned into an example of Farnheim and Lundberg's women in *The Modern Women and the Lost Sex* (1947), and their intimidating message of the severe consequences women working outside the home face.

In *A Woman's View* Jeanine Basinger discusses how "Lana Turner [Lora] plays a woman who does not live a life, but who only imitates living a life" (206), arguing that her life is a performance about feelings, instead of real feelings. In her pursuit of wealth, she neglects her personal life and her true feelings. The underlying motif that I am interested in investigating is how the film raises the question of women and work, and thus indicates that

the proper place for a woman is to be a devoted mother, not a career woman. Lucy Fisher argues in her introduction to *Imitation of Life*: "(…) the ideology of the fifties cast *all* working women as *performers*, dissembling their maternal functions" (15). Lora shares this concern when she realizes that in her pursuit of a career, she has failed to be a caring and devoted mother. This distinction fits in perfectly with the leading notion in post-war America that women's true vocation was motherhood. In Lora's case, it is her lover Steve and her daughter Susie who judge her position and deeds. Wanting to combine her career and motherhood on top of having a relationship with a man, are regarded as stubborn and selfish desires. Steve and Susie's objections to Lora's choices echo the strong conventions of post-war America, and thus indicate that Lora is "denying them both the life they deserve through her selfish ambition" (Basinger 208). Lora is condemned for wanting to succeed in the public sphere, instead of remaining confined to the private domestic sphere. She is made to learn the painful lesson of how life's "true" worth lies in the home. The irony of the ending underlines how Lora thought she knew what she wanted, but was evidently wrong. But still, according to the director himself, "you don't believe the happy end, and you are not really supposed to. What remains in your memory is the funeral" (Halliday 132). Everything seems to be "swell" in the short, last scene, right after Annie's grandiose funeral. But the audience senses that it is not, mainly because it is hard to believe that the characters will change so drastically. The irony of the happy ending alludes to the fact that Sirk's film offers no imitation of life. It is hard to believe that Lora suddenly will lose her ambitions and return to domesticity, and that Sarah Jane is likely to return to her burlesque life style, having little or no other options. The Sirkian endings do not clearly fit generic expectations of a happy ending. They are disquieting and ambiguous and have been extensively discussed by different scholars from the 1970s and onwards. Like Friedan's housewives, Lora seeks more to life than a husband, children, and a home, and in this respect Sirk offers a picture of the contradictory images women suffered in post-war America, as they were seen as threatening the male ambition in their pursuit of a career.

As mentioned earlier, this film offers an uncommon richness of complex narrative structures dealing with several different aspects concerning gender, race, and class, especially that of women, work and race relations. Although the film was released in 1959, the initial story is set in the late 1940s, when Lora and Annie first meet on a public beach. The very core of the story is situated in the immediate post-war era, which I have sketched out as a period of dramatic changes for American women's social position. Lora's rise to success takes us from the late 1940s to 1958, a decade that witnessed shifts in women's employment and their

relations to domestic responsibilities. In this manner, the film is at pace with its contemporary audience. Both Lora and Annie's bi-racial daughter Sarah Jane strain against the leading code of what is acceptable behavior for their gender, race and class. It is hard to discuss gender relations in this film without touching on the matters of race, given the significant part black women play in *Imitation of Life*. The vast differences in Lora's and Sarah Jane's situations emphasize their different possibilities: Lora is privileged by being white and is able to move up the social and career ladder. Sarah Jane serves as her perfect foil who by virtue of her race and class is forever doomed to marginality, exclusion and rejection. According to Sirk himself, it is the issue of race that initially was his specific interest in the film:

> The only interesting thing is the Negro angle (…) The imitation of life is not the real life, Lana Turner's life is a very cheap imitation. The girl is choosing the limitations of life instead of being a negro. The picture [Sarah Jane] is a piece of social criticism – of both black and white. You can't escape what you are.[12]

Despite the importance of race in this film, the focus in this paper rests almost exclusively on white women and work in combination with the issues of failing motherhood. Still, it is important to include the racial aspect because it gives a wider impression of how American society held back African-Americans, and thus reinforced class and race distinctions, despite the leading American myth of the "classless" society. Race clearly race becomes an ideological issue in this film, and "its emotional impact obscures the class and gender questions that accompany it" (Byars 241). Annie and Lora appear as close friends, which minimizes the racial tensions. But still, Sarah Jane's white complexion most clearly comments on the racial aspect, as she can pass as white and her success in life rests on her denying her black roots.

Far From Heaven

Todd Haynes is an independent director, interested in queer themes at odds with his contemporary society. *Far From Heaven* (2002) is Haynes' modern tribute to the 1950s Sirkian melodrama. Although Haynes is most closely imitating *All That Heaven Allows*, he borrows techniques from all of Sirk's films, especially the use of color and the strict mise-en-scène. The significance of the title clearly refers to its main source of inspiration, *All That*

[12] The quote is from the BBC interview, 1979, of Douglas Sirk.

Heaven Allows, even though Haynes' title is far more explicit than Sirk's more subtle titles, indicating that the world in which this film is located is very far from being perfect. Like *All That Heaven Allows, Far From Heaven* explores issues of women's social position and sexuality, but since it is shot in 2002, and not in the 1950s, Haynes stretches the boundaries further with the plot and the characters, not being limited by the strong censorship and moral conventions in the 1950s. Like Sirk in *Imitation of Life*, Haynes also deals with issues of fighting moral conventions, but as opposed to the 1950s melodramas, Haynes, (and Daldry in *The Hours*) is not preoccupied with giving the children a central role. In comparison to the 1950s melodramas, the female protagonists in the contemporary contributions distance themselves from their children and try to escape from their nuclear families, rather than striving to keep them together.

In *Far From Heaven* Julianne Moore plays Cathy Whitaker, the perfect wife of the highly recognized TV salesman, Frank Whitaker. Through their flawless appearance, beautiful home and popularity among the social elite of their New England suburban town, they represent American consumerism and prosperity. Cathy and Frank have the perfect family façade intact, which is clearly stated at the very beginning of the film when Cathy is interviewed for the *Weekly Gazette*, a local women's magazine. The headline is: "Behind every great man, there is a great woman! Cathy Whitaker, a woman devoted to her family and kind to Negroes". The Whitaker's façade soon cracks and their social position is jeopardized when Cathy stumbles in on her husband kissing another man. In despair she becomes involved with her black, male gardener Raymond. The very core of the film evolves around the marital crisis between Frank and Cathy, and how vulnerable Cathy is a as a dependent woman suffering under town gossip. Frank's sexual frustrations and the fact that she finds herself drawn towards her gardener are equally important to the plot. Raymond comes across as a sensitive and intelligent man, but like Sarah Jane in *Imitation of Life* he is limited by his race.

During Cathy's interview in the *Weekly Gazette*, she openly greets her new gardener, Raymond, an act that does not go by unnoticed by the reporters. This scene strongly echoes the "garden scene" from *All That Heaven Allows*. Like Ron, Raymond is dressed in workers' clothes, which gives him a masculine and earthy image. As opposed to *All That Heaven Allows*, Raymond is not only from a lower class, but is also black. Raymond and Cathy do not become physical in their affection, but according to the strict 1950s moral code, their mutual attraction is scandalous in their respective black and white communities. Another interesting aspect of this film is the way in which Cathy, who does not become physically involved with

Raymond, is to blame for her deeds and suffers the most from gossip. It is Frank that establishes a physical relationship with another man. In Sharon Willis' article, "The Politics of Disappointment: Todd Haynes Rewrites Douglas Sirk", Cathy's well guarded secret about her husband's sexuality is discussed. "But soon the film will provide her with an 'open' secret of her own relationship with Raymond, with the community of hostile gazes around her fixing the erotic "meaning" of this relationship even before Cathy herself discovers it" (147). Like Cary in *All That Heaven Allows*, Cathy seems almost unaware of the magnitude of negative attention her relationship with Raymond triggers in her surroundings. Although their relationship does not fully emerge, it emerges all around them. Cathy's friends, family, and community cannot stand the fact that she finds company in a black man. Likewise, Raymond's black community reacts with opposition against his involvement to a white woman.

Surprisingly, Cathy's innocent relationship with Raymond is treated worse than Frank's homosexual relations. Nowhere is this clearer than in Cathy's confession to her closest friend, Eleanor. Her reaction when Cathy openheartedly reveals Frank's "condition" and her feelings towards Raymond, pin-points the different treatment of the scandals.

Cathy: "So, you see why I couldn't tell you anything. Anything at all."
Eleanor: "Oh, you dear sweet kid, in a million years, I couldn't have imagined. Not Frank."
Cathy: "I think that's what has been hardest of all. The endless secrecy, our entire life just shut in the dark."
Eleanor: "Are there savings?"
Cathy: "None, or nothing to speak of. Certainly not with Frank's job on the line."

Eleanor continues to support her, and promises to help her out if there is anything she needs. But her sympathy ends abruptly when Cathy reveals her true feelings for Raymond. Eleanor finds Cathy's attraction towards Raymond more unbearable than Frank's homosexual nature. The whole scene is almost solely shot from the outside, looking in through the window, which indicates how trapped Cathy feels, especially before and after the conversation with Eleanor. The repeated use of mirrors, windows and reflections to express an isolated state of mind echoes Sirk's films, especially the TV-scene from *All That Heaven Allows*. Whereas the female protagonists in Sirk's films stand alone as widows who both risk scandals by the choices they make, Cathy in *Far From Heaven* is a married woman who experiences that her crime of spending time with a black man is treated as more transgressive than her husband's homosexual affairs, a behavior which is prohibited by law. Cathy, who breaks a social code, is treated worse than Frank, who breaks a moral code.

Haynes follows the melodrama tradition in *Far From Heaven,* and addresses social issues in terms of race, class, gender and sexuality through domestic and romantic entanglements. Whereas these issues were the unspoken and underlying elements in Sirk's films, Haynes places them right in the centre. As discussed earlier, the basic model for a family melodrama centers on the conflicts and tensions in the middle-class family, most often in a repressive small-town environment, and is concerned with women and children. As a contrast to Sirk's melodramas and his depiction of motherhood, Cathy ignores her children more than Sirk's women do. Almost every scene with Cathy and her kids represents some kind of hollowness, and the children appear as props. Sharon Willis argues how "Cathy's emphatic resistance to providing maternal attention figures as a site of the film's ambivalence" (144). This behavior, which is even more evident in *The Hours,* totally undercuts the child-centered form that the 1950s gender ideology advocated, and here, under Haynes' direction, motherhood takes on a whole new direction far from the maternal sacrifice clearly manifested in the Sirkian melodrama. While Cathy's children are hardly significant to the plot, the children function more as markers to highlight the Whitaker's social position and a necessity to uphold a nuclear family standard.

Like the strict use of mise-èn-scene in the Sirkian melodramas, *Far From Heaven's* interior and design are carefully planned. The objects that appear in the film indicate the desire for domestic perfection, controlled by the woman in the house, and reflect the consumer culture and the post-war American way of life. In contrast to Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows'* direct critique of the consumer culture, *Far From Heaven* embraces it by putting Frank in the position of an advertising executive and Cathy as a housewife and a party-planner. *Far From Heaven* has given Cathy the image of the housewife the 1950s dreamed of, maintaining domesticity and making sure the home is in its proper place, yet, as in *Imitation of Life,* she has a black maid helping her.

Far From Heaven has been described by scholars as a post-modern film: "working as a meticulous exercise in style, creating a painstaking facsimile of the aesthetic patterns of a 1950s film" (Mercer & Shingler 75). The themes of broken dreams and lost opportunities are more strongly emphasized here than in any of Sirk's films I have discussed, which both have a seemingly happy ending. While Sirk is ambiguous in his social critique, Haynes is more direct. The tense atmosphere in *Far From Heaven* brings about a sense of time standing still, and serves as a reminder of the social entrapment and fear of living out one's true sexuality or sharing one's true feelings. Sexuality and sexual yearning become powerful themes in *Far From Heaven.* In one exemplary scene, Cathy and her friends have

lunch and chatter about their husbands' sexual demands. Cathy listens silently, keeping a stiff smile on her face, not offering her own secrets. Yet, it is clear that she is painfully wondering why her sex life is so much less eventful than what she hears described around the table. The film explores in more depth heterosexual discontent, thus carrying more elements of a tragedy than Sirk's melodramas do. The contrast between the true feelings and how one is expected to feel are strong throughout the film that creates a sense of how fatal repressed feelings can be for everyone involved. This film is part of a string of stories in the American narrative tradition that challenge the success myth of the American Dream, expressed through the painful contradictions and the lost opportunities within marginalized groups, or groups that challenges leading moral conventions.

The Hours

Stephen Daldry's film *The Hours* (2002) shares many of the same qualities as its contemporary counterpart *Far From Heaven*. Not only are they produced and released the same year, but they both deal with women trapped in post-war conventions in American small-town suburbia. In contrast to Haynes' film, *The Hours* is not directly inspired by Sirk's big scale studio films, but is based upon a rather complex novel which is a modern revision of Virginia Wolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*.[13] The adapted version of the film garnered much critical acclaim and was nominated for no less than nine Academy Awards and six Golden Globes in 2002. This woman-driven film is deeply moving and gives a touching portrayal of three women, representing three different generations in the 20th century, thus fitting perfectly within the melodrama genre. The story presents each woman on a particular day and shows how they deal with ambivalent sexual identities, issues of suicide, middle-class claustrophobia, motherhood and an intense desire to escape from their "prison-like" realities.

Again Julianne Moore successfully portrays a deeply frustrated post-war mother and wife, desperately trying to fit in to the customs of her time. In *Far From Heaven,* the female protagonist comes across as a devoted 1950s housewife whose world completely shatters when her husband comes out of the closet. In *The Hours*, Laura Brown is not like Cathy, trapped in a marital crisis of adultery, but is still an unhappy and misplaced housewife, trapped in a conservative, heterosexual marriage. The focus on Laura's part of the plot is more

[13] Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* was released in 1998. The writer often deals with characters' ambiguous sexualities, and themes of family, illness identity and belonging, and motherhood and domesticity.

related towards her inner self and how she copes with family life and traditional values, struggling with her own sexual identity and her female identity as a devoted wife and mother. Lora Brown explicitly struggles with the "the problem that has no name", and thus illustrates the female schizophrenia and the containment of female public participation in post-war America. As I have discussed in Chapter 2, female representation in post-war melodrama was centered upon Cold War ideology, with the nuclear family in a small-town American community at its center. Laura's character highlights these aspects. Unlike Haynes' film and the Sirkian melodramas, the female protagonist in *The Hours* chooses a different path than her earlier female counterparts in the films in discussion. Laura does not choose family life and domesticity in the end, nor does she eventually lose her marriage and social position in the same way as Cathy Withaker does in *Far From Heaven*. Lora Brown makes the grand escape and ultimately abandons her family to lead a solitary life of her own, building up a career as a librarian in Canada.

In the film Laura Brown is the wife of a war veteran, and supported by the G.I. Bill they have established themselves in lower middle-class suburbia. She is the mother of a three-year-old boy and is five months pregnant. The audience witnesses how Laura strives to fulfill the housewife role that is expected from her. In an article by Maureen Shannon from *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, the different female personalities in the film are discussed from a psychological angle, where Laura is described as the one who "knows how to act the part of a wife and mother but only up to a point" (Sheenan 417). In the film, one cannot help noticing how unbearable Laura finds her social position as a wife and mother, and how she constantly tries to act as if she is perfectly content in her role as a housewife. Her failure in acting out the role is particularly interesting in relation to her three-year old son, whom she ignores most of the time. He gives the most touchingly portrayal of a neglected child who exposes her bad acting skills. There are several scenes that express Laura's awkwardness in being trapped and not being successful in her acting as a content housewife, but I have chosen one that is much discussed and stands out and alludes to several aspects of post-war female discontent: The scene where Laura's neighbor and friend, Kitty Barlow, comes to visit while Laura is helplessly trying to bake a cake for her husband's birthday. Kitty comes unexpectedly and goes on and on about how easy it is to make a cake. Laura feels guilty and complains that the cake did not work. At the first glimpse, Kitty comes across as the more confident post-war wife.

Kitty: Everyone can make a cake – it is ridiculously easy. I bet you didn't grease the pan.

Laura: I greased the pan.
Kitty: You have other virtues. And Dan loves you anyway. He thinks everything you do is wonderful. It's true.

They continue to chatter about superficial matters, the country club and how Kitty prefers to go out, and drink dry martinis on her husband's birthday. Still, the audience senses that everything is far from perfect:

Kitty: These guys are something aren't they?
Laura: You can say that again. They came home from the war. They deserved it, didn't they? After all they have been through.
Kitty: What did they deserve?
Laura: I don't know, us I guess. All this.

Laura looks around her well equipped home, as if it was cut out of Nixon's ranch-style promotion in the "Kitchen Debate". Both women are well aware that their men deserved devoted wives after all the evil they have experienced in the war, just like the post-war propaganda films advocated. Kitty appears bright and confident in her role as a perfect wife, but her façade soon cracks when Laura poses questions that dig deeper below the perfect facade. The kitchen scene continues with Kitty pointing to a book on Laura's table, *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Wolf. She asks what it is about. Laura answers willingly that it is about a woman, a hostess who is planning a party and acts incredibly confident in her role. "Because of that, everyone thinks she is fine, but she isn't." During this scene we learn that everything in Kitty's life is not so well either; she is childless and on her way to the hospital to investigate a growth in her uterus. Nevertheless, Kitty maintains her superficial and chic charisma and continues to act out her role, seemingly content with her state of mind, almost as if she has rehearsed to act like this. Kitty represents everything that Laura is helplessly striving to become, but Laura's acting skills are not as good as Kitty's. I find this scene important, as it visualizes the emptiness of the feminine agenda that Friedan revealed, where in reality women were searching for a deeper dimension to life. Laura's feelings of failure as a mother and a wife are obvious throughout the film, and "the problem that has no name" is symbolized when the scene culminates with a tense and contained kiss between Laura and Kitty, which serves as an "indication of female sexual and social possibility in 1949" (Sanders 118). This scene is pivotal in many ways, especially as it dramatizes a potentially subversive relationship, and in this manner it links up to the more classic gay dilemma in *Far From Heaven*.

Closing Remarks

As in Sirk's films, music plays a huge part in both *Far From Heaven* and *The Hours*. Equally important, the latter explore American hypocrisy and double standards, touching on contradictory social conventions, and they explore race, class, and gender issues more in depth than their earlier counterparts. Highly influenced by the Sirkian melodramas, Todd Haynes' *Far From Heaven* can be regarded as an experiment of what themes can be put in a 1950s context that the 1950s would not allow. "Haynes calls attention both to the issues that these films engage and to the issues with which Hollywood film at that time was unable to deal (or at least to deal adequately)" (Joyrich 189).

While *Imitation of Life* revolves around the concern of women working outside the home: a housewife's rise to financial success, and "that money cannot buy happiness, only family can" (Byars 239), *All That Heaven Allows* revolves around the issue of unconditional love, across class and social expectations. *Far From Heaven*, in contrast, presents a marital deadlock between Cathy and Frank Whitaker based on forbidden sexual attraction. Laura Brown's character in *The Hours* digs even deeper into scandalous post-war behavior: abandoning her husband and children for no other purpose than self-fulfillment. What is more obvious is that both Cathy and Laura have more distant relationship towards her children than Sirk's women have. Whereas the issue of maternal sacrifice is clearly evident in Sirk's films, Haynes and Daldry focus more on women's sexual desires or lack of sexual freedom. The maternal distance is arguably even more present in *The Hours* than in *Far From Heaven*, but both films focus on the effects of boredom and frustration associated with the housewife role. Yet, all the films explore the dark sides of the American culture and thus challenge the ultimate American Dream. Unlike Sirks's women, who stand alone as widows, the latter films express a stronger sense of loss and loneliness by digging deeper into the complexity of marital deadlock and the sexual yearnings these women had.

The heterosexual ideals of the suburban domesticity have failed both women in the contemporary melodrama. Whereas Sirk's films revolve more around issues of choosing the "right" man to marry under the "right" conditions at odds with their family or community, *Far From Heaven* and *The Hours* come across as more sexually melancholic, which produces a sensation of alienation and loss. The more sexually explicit aspect is partly explained by the time span in production between these films, and the historical development in the history of sexuality. These films deal with themes that "would have been impossible for the 1950s melodrama to countenance for both societal reasons and also due to stipulations of the

production code" (Mercer and Shingler 75). Equally important, all the women in question are torn between their dreams and aspirations on the one hand, and what their family and social circle expect from them on the other hand. Ultimately, the films explore the tensions between the women's personal needs and longings, and thus illustrate the limited choices these women had. The four women escape from the confines of their post-war white, middle-class suburban environment by exploring other social and sexual yearnings. The endings of the films are significant as they comment on the price the women have to pay for the choices they make. In contrast to Sirk's ironic endings discussed earlier, Haynes' ending is basically stripped of irony, leaving Cathy with nothing, no husband, no lover, no friends. By following her heart and her husband's wish she ultimately ends up losing everything, her material well-being as well as her social dignity. The wordless last scene in *Far From Heaven* emphasizes Cathy's solitude and how destroyed her world has become when her men choose to go elsewhere in search for a better life for themselves.

The purpose of this thesis has been to compare old versus new films all set in post-war America, to stress the fact female ideology and the idea of separate spheres has been and still is a contradiction in terms. Female representation in the selected films is especially significant to an understanding of the contrasting images that reemerged in the post-war years, since both bodies of films express attitudes toward race, class, gender, and sexuality largely through the female characters. From the 1950s perspective, non-traditional women, women who challenged their place in the nuclear family, were not allowed to keep their independence. Invariably, these women were converted to more traditional roles after learning that their independence was a mistake. However, within the perspective of history, political concerns are manifested in the experience of these films, especially regarding how women were restricted to be heroines only within the boundaries of their "proper" sphere. The contemporary melodramas, however, give a broader perspective on gender ideology and go beyond the post-war taboos to include sexual frustrations and sexual yearning across race and gender lines. Comparing and contrasting old versus new films set in the same period of time tell us a good deal about the changes in the political landscape from the 1950s to today, especially within the institution of family. Whereas the old films remind the audiences of heterosexual discontent and the limited choices women experienced within the traditional familial structure, the contemporary films serve as a reminder of how the legacy of post-war gender ideology still looms large within the institution of family, and how moral restrictions still control female ideology. Women are still to blame for a dysfunctional family if they choose sexual freedom.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis has been to demonstrate how the cult of domesticity that strongly reemerged in the immediate post-war era in America influenced women's social position and female representation on screen. By pointing to a selection of films I have sought to validate my analysis and demonstrate how women in the post-war era suffered under contradictory images that fostered false moralistic conventions and preserved confusing social patterns under a strict patriarchal structure of power. Female representation in post-war melodrama attracts attention to how women's social positions have been negotiated, in light of how gender constructions and sexuality remained implicit on screen. Representation of gender is balanced by attention to class, race, and sexuality, and raises many important questions about American culture and ideology in the 1950s, how it emerged, and its legacy in modern times.

By referring to some important socio-historical events in Chapter 2, I have been able to trace how film arguably reflects the cultural conflicts of the larger society. From a historical angle, Hollywood was not only a commercial tool to serve capital interests and sell consumerists dreams to the masses, but it was also a site for depicting modern mythology. Hollywood as a "myth-machine" produced specifically American dreams, rooted in historical and ideological events that were exported to the masses, raising important questions of historical and cultural value to the audiences. My intention has been to show how the melodrama genre, in focusing on women's way of life, functions as a valuable source to tell a woman's story. Equally important has been to reveal how women's way of life has been framed by the dominant ideology of the home as women's proper place.

Throughout the thesis, I have referred to Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystiqu*e. Her milestone contribution to feminist awareness sought to identify the "truths" about the "natural feminine" that emerged in the post-war years. Also, she attempted to prove how the feminine mystique that hardened in the post-war years denied women the opportunity to develop their own identities, serving only one purpose: To cause women and their families great harm. Arguing that the division in post-war American female ideology was between the housewife and the career woman, she declared: "We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: 'I want something more out of my life than my husband and my children and my home.'" (Friedan 32).

The post-war melodramas that I have sketched out imply the same conflicts Friedan charted. *All That Heaven Allows* denotes Cary's choice between family and love, but she could not have both. In *Imitation of Life,* Lora struggles between the two choices: To work

and earn money in the public sphere, or to stay home and take care of her family and husband in the private sphere. The films demonstrate the cultural status quo indicating how female subjectivity was under constantly negotiation. Herein lays the paradox: both films end with the female protagonists choosing domesticity – demonstrating their "proper" place according to the leading ideology of that time. Both women had to give up their independence to take up correct, modern feminine values. The ironic endings indicate the strong social critique these films offered and how they dramatized "the problem that has no name".

Melodrama as a genre is not uniform in any simple way and is difficult to reduce to a single definition. But what melodrama does, according to Byars, is to "speak beyond capacities of representation" (167). If one looks at the specific films in discussion, the melodrama genre has been a valuable vehicle for working through female trauma. Feminist film theorists have seen this genre as a place to study female agency and pleasure, and to question the patriarchal structures of power. The last decade has seen Hollywood melodrama turn in a radical way toward the ideological tensions surrounding queerness and female identity. Todd Haynes' *Far From Heaven* (2002) is an interesting example of an attempt at updating the Sirkian melodrama for a contemporary audience. Drawing heavily on Sirkian melodramatic techniques, this film questions the relationship between past and present, bound by conventions then and now. Both *The Hours* (2002) and *Far From Heaven* (2002) are women-driven films that look beneath the surface of everyday life, but these films go beyond the general female heterosexual representation that Sirk depicted to explore queer themes, thus indicating that there still are battles to fight for marginalized groups, extending the concept of "the problem that has no name."

In the early stages of this work, I envisioned my own deceased Norwegian grandmother, who fit perfectly into the image of the 1950s mother of the baby boom generation. In high-heels and aprons she waited on her family and seemed to successfully conform to the female expectations of her time, always looking to America for inspiration. The female myths in post-war America, how they emerged, and how they affected the lives of those who tried to conform to them, might help us to come to terms with ourselves, the era that followed and the time in which we live. The amount of research material and scholarly literature on this topic is vast, and the great challenge has been to make a contribution to a field that has already been given a lot of attention. My intentions have been to look to the past through the lens of Hollywood Studio cinema, to comment on the present and to investigate how America and American mass culture have contributed to shape perceptions of women's lives. The American 1950s and 1960s are important to bear in mind in the contemporary

political and cultural agenda as we are witnessing a tendency similar to that of the 1950s in the context of American foreign policy, with the "war on terror" and the neo-conservatives' strong focus on family values and stability. In addition, today's fashion is retrospective and many of the consumer gadgets, so common in the fifties and sixties, are yet again extremely popular. Even though time has passed and a generation of women have revolted against their limitations based on gender, race and sexuality, and yet much still remains the same, especially within the institution of family.

All the films in question depict a potential scandal in suburbia that revolves around the female protagonists, to reveal their vulnerabilities. Moreover, in my investigation of specific scenes from the films in question I have been interested in the persistence of a certain kind of repetitive melodramatic motif, creating myths that touch on something basic in the white middle-class cultural heritage. In mysterious ways, female ideology to a certain extent still relies on the legacy of both the Victorian woman and the post-war housewife.

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